

McNamara's Legacy Is a Genera

By Carol R. Richards

AT A RETREAT in Mt. Sinai last May, 14 men and women sat in a circle and told their life stories. Roughly, we broke down into two age groups: the World War II crowd — mostly retirees — and my cohort, the Vietnam generation. As we spoke, two large themes emerged.

For the older group, all men, fighting in World War II formed the backbone of their subsequent lives; they had left home as uncertain kids and returned as focused adults, serene that they had done their part.

For the younger men and women, their experience fighting in or against the war in Vietnam had sent them in as many different directions as there were individuals at this church retreat. There was the Vietnam veteran with two purple hearts who had been spat upon when he returned to the states. There was me, the editor whose campus paper had campaigned against the war. And others — pro- and anti-war. *Our* theme was anomie. We had come back from our service or our rebellions



Carol R. Richards is deputy editor of Newsday's editorial pages.

lacking the older group's sense of completeness. Whether hawks or doves, our emotions about the war were still raw. It had set us against one another in our youth, and against our country.

So it was hard to watch with compassion as Robert McNamara made his quavery self-defense on the "Today" show Tuesday. The secretary of defense who directed the Vietnam War for President Lyndon Johnson now says he knew in 1967 that it could not be won and that the United States should get out. And yet McNamara failed to speak out.

What possible excuse is there for staying mum when he might have saved more than 20,000 U.S. lives by hastening the war's end? To me, his silence seems monstrous.

And so it does to those who fought. You've probably heard the bitter comments of prominent veterans like John McCain, the POW-turned-senator. I spoke with lesser-known vets, whose attitude was summed up in the words of Charles Kaiser of Kings Park — whose purple hearts I first learned of at the Mt. Sinai retreat: "McNamara is a fool," Kaiser said. "He always was a fool."

The vets are entitled to anger; their lives were on the line. But the effect of McNamara's dishonesty on those who didn't fight merits examination, too.

In modern mythology, the '60s mean sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, but that reputation is a smear to those of us old enough to have had our lives rechanneled by Vietnam. At Syracuse University, I editorialized against it; many of my male friends pursued

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graduate studies or taught school to escape the draft; two fellow students fled to Canada. Not one of those life choices was made casually. And although saving one's skin was definitely part of the equation, idealism loomed large. We struggled with the question: If the war was immoral, did one have an obligation to country or to the larger ideal?

As we worried over where our loyalties ought to lie, down in the Pentagon, Robert McNamara now tells us, he was doing the same thing.

He made the wrong choice then. As an advocate of war who came to doubt the war, he lived a lie. That lie was the rot at the heart of the war, and it contributed a good deal to the corrosive cynicism the Baby Boom generation feels about government

even today. I think you can trace the unraveling of our culture — the drug abuse, the family disintegration, the disrespect for old virtues like loyalty and patriotism — back to the government's breaching of its bonds of truth with the people. The seeds of that breach were planted with the Vietnam War and grew to full flower in Watergate — another case of a government coverup.

McNamara's admission that "We were wrong, terribly wrong" might be expected to give aid and comfort to the old anti-war crowd. But his confirmation that we were right just makes me mad. Too much damage was done to allow gloating. Ironically, both sides now revile him — the doves because he failed to speak out, the hawks because they believed in "McNamara's War" — and *he* didn't.